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BALLOONS MAY REPLACE OTHER AIRCRAFT IN SPOTTING FISH

In normal operation the balloon is brought down by a cable attached to a winch on the ship's deck.

The balloon is inflated with air heated by a propane burner, and once aloft balloonists can maintain the lifting power by reheating the air using a burner attached to the top of the gondola. Propane tanks in the ship carry spare fuel.

A number of tuna boats on the West Coast carried helicopters during the past few years, but they have not been satisfactory. The biggest trouble, say veteran boat owners, is the difficulty of maintaining the "choppers" at sea.

Other boats have tried small seaplanes, but these too have been mostly eliminated. Recovering the planes in rough weather proved to be hazardous and difficult.

Presently many tuna boats on the West Coast hire free lance pilots, but small planes do not have the range for working far at sea.

Fishery biologist Roger Green of the La Jolla Fishery-Oceanography Center says the next step in the balloon project is to design a balloon with aerodynamic qualities which can be towed by a tuna boat without hindering its speed.

Other fishery experts are looking forward to an even more sophisticated approach to sighting tuna. They are working on plans to equip the aerial platforms with television equipment completely controlled from the towing vessel.

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